



Exploring Transition Research as Transformative Science

International Sustainability Transitions Conference 2016

The International Sustainability Transitions Conference (IST) will discuss advances in the field of sustainability transformations. The conference will be organized by the Sustainability Transitions Research Network, in which both the Wuppertal Institute and Leuphana University of Lüneburg participate.

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A Research Field Emerges

Sustainability transitions research and the respective scientific community have grown successfully since the late 1990s, starting in the Netherlands with the *Knowledge Network for System Innovations and Transitions (KSI)*. Today, sustainability transitions research is recognizable and further developing as a distinct field with its own research agenda, theoretical concepts and research approaches, increasing scientific publication activities, e.g., in the journal *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, and political influence at EU and national levels. The focus of sustainability transitions research is on transformations of major socio-technical systems of provision and use in areas such as energy, water, mobility and food towards more sustainable societies. Sustainability transitions research focuses on the dynamics of system change, studying innovation in its various forms (social innovation, business model innovation, technological innovation, infrastructural innovation, institutional innovation). It is a multi-disciplinary field with inputs from economics, science and technology studies, geography, political science, management, sociology and history. It is also a transdisciplinary field in the sense that it focuses on “real-world problems”, it is impact- and solution-oriented, and aims at

fostering societal change towards sustainable development.

Conference Themes

The *International Sustainability Transitions Conference (IST) 2016* will be guided by the theme *Exploring Transition Research as Transformative Science*, and it offers a platform for sharing experiences, critically discussing and further developing impact- and solution-oriented research approaches enabling transitions in practice. The conference aims to reflect on the challenges and lessons learned in concrete research projects, on theoretical contributions advancing the understanding and conceptualization of transitions, and on the role of science and scientists involved in transitions to sustainability. *IST 2016* provides the annual opportunity for transition scholars to meet and further develop their shared research agenda.¹

The following questions related to transformative science will be addressed at the conference:

- What are the conceptual and methodological challenges of transformative science?

- How can we assess the societal impact of transition research? What are adequate concepts, methods and innovative approaches for impact evaluation?
- What are common challenges in newly emerging research approaches, such as real-world laboratories, living labs, transition experiments, etc. (cf. Schäpke et al. 2015)? What are best practices and promising advances for future research in this field?

With the focus on the role of transformative science for sustainability and on transdisciplinary research settings in various

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¹ STRN research agenda:
www.transitionsnetwork.org/files/STRN_research_agenda_20_August_2010%282%29.pdf

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International Sustainability Transitions Conference 2016

kinds of “transition labs”, momentum will be generated for core themes of the *NaWis* network as well as for the international visibility of the German sustainability science community. There are already many personal contacts and cooperation in concrete projects between the *Sustainability Transitions Network (STRN)* and the *NaWis* network; *IST 2016* allows to strengthen those links, to directly exchange experiences and to develop new collaborations. As a special cooperation initiative with the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research’s (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF) program *Research for Sustainable Development (Forschung für Nachhaltige Entwicklungen, FONA)*, a side session will be organized regarding *Sustainable Economy* in the context of *Social-Ecological Research (Sozial-ökologische Forschung, SÖF)*.

Other key topics at *IST 2016* include the broad range of issues and debates in sustainability transitions research, such as the governance of sustainability transitions in energy, mobility, food or water systems, the role of politics and power, of actors, institutions, infrastructures, technological and social innovation (see also Brand 2016, in this issue).

Another central issue relates to the transition towards a sustainable economy focusing on more sustainable consumption and production patterns, the role of industry incumbents and sustainable entrepreneurship, and the search for alternative indicators of well-being at local and global levels.

Increased interest has also emerged for non-European contexts and the question whether existing transitions frameworks can be applied in other parts of the world, and how local bodies of knowledge and contextual aspects can be integrated.

Theoretical advances in transition studies, building on core concepts such as the multi-level perspective, technological innovation systems, transition management and reflexive governance of sustainability will be explored.

Furthermore, theories of change from other fields and critical approaches as well as methodological advances in transition studies will also be taken into account.

Conference Details

The 7th *IST* will take place in Wuppertal, Germany, from 6 to 9 September 2016. The conference will be hosted by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy in cooperation with the Center for Transformation Research and Sustainability (TransZent) at the University of Wuppertal.

IST 2016 also provides an opportunity to get to know better the Wuppertal Institute and also the city of Wuppertal. Since its foundation the Wuppertal Institute has been a sustainability research institute positioned at the science-society interface. During the *IST* week, it celebrates its 25th anniversary: on September 8, a one-day anniversary conference will be held, and an excursion to Wuppertal’s urban real-world lab offers a very practical transition experience to all guests and conference participants.

MORE INFORMATION:

www.ist2016.org

References

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- Schäpke, N., M. Singer-Brodowski, F. Stelzer, M. Bergmann, D. J. Lang. 2015. Creating space for change: Real-world laboratories for sustainability transformations. The case of Baden-Württemberg. *GAIA* 24/4: 281–283.

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